



TALKING TENSE

What is tense?

Tense comes from the old French word “tens” meaning “time” and it refers to the marking in time of when something takes place. In English, we do this in several ways, but primarily by modifying the **verb** in the sentence.

Expressing Tense

Verb Forms

Not all languages change the verb to mark tense. Chinese languages are one example. Another is Auslan (Australian sign language). Both these languages can aptly express events in the past or future, but not by changing the verb form. In Chinese, tense may be marked by using a time word, such as yesterday, and sometimes by adding a small word at the end of the sentence. Sometimes, NO marker is used and the time is simply self-evident from the context.

English, however, loves changing its verb form according to when the action took place. There are twelve forms and reading the list below will conjure up twelve different meanings (some subtle in their difference, some more obvious).

You can imagine that using and comprehending all of these accurately may seem close to impossible for a student with a language-learning impairment.

Take for example the verb “EAT”...

Simple Present - I eat
Simple Past - I ate
Simple Future - I will eat
Present Perfect - I have eaten
Past Perfect - I had eaten
Future Perfect - I will have eaten
Present Progressive - I am eating
Past Progressive - I was eating
Future Progressive - I will be eating
Present Perfect Progressive - I have been eating
Past Perfect Progressive - I had been eating
Future Perfect Progressive - I will have been eating

It's enough to turn you off your food.

When working with a student whose speech lacks tense, I would usually start with the **PRESENT progressive** and the **simple forms of PAST and FUTURE**.

Simple Past.

“Simple Past” is not always simple!

In English we have both regular and irregular forms.

Regular forms mean that we simply add –ed. This is a “rule” of grammar that some children overgeneralise in producing words like “runned”. (see Development of Tense below).

But even with this “adding of –ed”, there are some interesting variations...

- Sometimes the –ed sounds like /d/ (rolled, banged, smiled) but...
- Sometimes the –ed sounds like a /t/ (jumped, ripped, laughed). This can cause problems with spelling when students are overfocused on “sounding-out” rather than attending to meaning/suffixes. They will write “jumpt, ript, laught”.
- Sometimes the –ed sounds like /ed/ (lasted, skidded, batted). This happens after a **t** and **d**. Some young children who have mastered this pattern of verbs will sometimes overgeneralise the /ed/ to other verbs and say things like “jumpted” and “smileded.”

Irregular forms. Irregular forms are where we change the entire word to a new word. Although lists of irregular verb forms can be a handy reference for teaching, I would never recommend “drilling” of lists for students with language impairment.

Note: There are some patterns to discover and this can be made into an interesting literacy challenge for middle to upper primary school students. Have students come up with lists of words that have a consistent pattern, but then have them also list an exception or two. Students can work in groups, tackling a pattern each. Reference lists may be used. (Simply google LIST OF IRREGULAR PAST TENSE)

For example,

EE → E and add T	: Kept, swept, felt	BUT Peeped
D→T	: Bent, built	BUT Mended
I→O	: Drove, wrote, won, rode	BUT Liked
Drop the E	: Bit, hid, slid	BUT Sided
OW → EW	: Knew, blew, threw	BUT Snowed
Same spelling	: Put, hurt, read	

Time Words/ Phrases

Time phrases or words are those that help “set the scene” for when something happened. They include “three weeks ago” “in a few days” “every morning” “yesterday” “when it rains” “next Tuesday” “today” “soon”. The time word/phrase should match the verb word/phrase to be grammatical.

(In the Alien Talk program, the PURPLE TIME Alien has to work with the YELLOW VERB Alien). See www.pelicantalk.com

Children with language impairment may rely on time words/phrases alone to mark tense when they are talking. For example, “*Last night my Dad go fishing*” or “*I finish it tomorrow.*”

Likewise, children may rely on hearing these time words or phrases to help them make understand.

“*Joel’s hidden the eggs and we’re all going out to find them.*” can be rephrased as “*Before school (gesture backwards), Joel hid the eggs... and very soon (gesture forward)... all of us will go and find them.*”

Some students will not understand certain time phrases and in this case, some explicit teaching using a timeline comes in handy. For older students, I explain that if you hear the word “ago” at the end of the phrase, it means *past* and if it starts with “in”, it means *future*. I demonstrate these visually. First I draw a horizontal timeline and draw us together and write NOW in the middle. I then draw them as a baby at far end of the left axis and them as a woman/man at the far end of the right axis. I then say a time word/phrase and together we discuss where it should be placed. Some may be points, some may be continuous lines to represent ongoing.

Try: YESTERDAY TOMORROW A MONTH AGO A WEEK AGO IN A FORTNIGHT IN A DECADE WHEN I AM A TEENAGER EVERY MORNING LAST SUMMER IN A MINUTE WHEN I WAS THREE IN SUMMER

TIP ONE: Where you can, use time phrases/words to help students understand the tense of your spoken sentences.

Just to make things even more confusing...

Sometimes TENSE and TIME don’t match.

Take, for example, the headline:

“*MAN WINS A MILLION DOLLARS*” and the comment:

“I am leaving in three days”.

We can also use present tense when talking about the past in a colloquial manner. Consider:

“Then... last night... he sits there and tells me every detail of his operation and I say ‘Too much information!’ and he just laughs.”

TIP TWO: Avoid exposing a child to this “mismatch” when trying to increase their use and understanding of past tense.

Gesture

We can also gesture to indicate tense. Gesture is a wonderful addition to spoken language and is particularly important to enhance how well students with language difficulties can comprehend tense.

But what gesture is appropriate to highlight “past” or “future” or “now”?

Ordinarily, I use a hand sweeping over my shoulder to gesture when the action has taken place in the past and forward when in the future. This is similar to some signs in Auslan, where future time words/phrases (such as next week, tomorrow and yesterday) are made moving forward or backward from the signer.

Interestingly, when you observe other people’s gestures, they may use a different “logic”. A leftward motion may indicate past and a rightward motion may indicate the future or “next”. A common one that I have observed is a gesture for “ongoing” which is a rolling hand to the right, as in “He went on and on and on...”

This use of gesture from left to right reflects the direction of written English. Linguist, Alice Gaby explains, however, that speakers from some other cultures think of time in a different spatial orientation to English speakers/writers. This may affect their gesturing. For example, when given sequence of pictures to lay out in order of time (eg. a whole banana, a half-peeled banana, an eaten banana), Mandarin speakers will often make vertical arrangements with the first at the top, and the last at the bottom. Gaby also suggests that if the language is written from right to left, like Hebrew or Arabic, then this is likely to result in the arrangement of a time sequence starting from the right. Her most fascinating findings came from her study of Kuuk Thaayorre, a language spoken in Pormpuraaw on Cape York, Australia. She noticed that speakers’ gestures changed according to the direction they were facing. Finally, she figured that the gesture was actually NOT changing at all, but the reference points were different to what she had been expecting. Speakers gestured towards the east when talking about the past and the west when talking about the future. This reference towards where the sun rises (past) and sets (future) is quite a wonderful and logical way of thinking about time. Unfortunately, this system of gesturing relies on an intrinsic knowledge of direction, so count me out on this one...

The relevance of all of this?

Apart from being interesting, it does stress that we should not assume that children will understand our gesture system because it makes sense to US. For example, when I do sequencing activities with students, I cannot assume that they do not understand time progression if they have laid the cards out right to left. Perhaps, for students who are not yet familiar with the conventions of written English language, the left to right order is simply something that does not yet make sense to them. *Consider this with students from other cultures, and students who have not been exposed to reading and writing.*

TIP THREE: Choose a gesturing system that is going to be used consistently between home, the classroom and therapy sessions. This is particularly important when tense is being explicitly targeted as a language goal. When speaking, my preference is the backward and forward motion because a left and right gesture system will be back-to-front if you are facing the listening. I gesture pointing down in front of me for “now”.

Development of Tense

Typical Development

Before the age of two, children mark tense mainly by context. They may use words such as “gone” (as in “*All gone!*”) that sound like past tense, but they are actually using a word that has been learnt as a whole (such as saying “*It BIG!*”)

Around two, a child’s speech is largely “telegraphic”, like the message that appears in a telegram. The main words are spoken, but they are void of grammatical changes that relate to tense. A child of two might say, “Bubba hide it” meaning “I have hidden it.”

The year following a child’s second birthday, morphology* begins to develop. They begin to move away from sounding telegraphic.

(Morphology= the aspect of language that involves the rules governing change in meaning at an “intra-word” level. This may be the adding of an –s to change a singular word to its plural, or using an irregular past tense of a verb.)

This stage coincides with an increase in the number of words or word-parts that a child can string together in a sentence.

An old study, still used as a reference today, was conducted by Roger Brown (1973), who set out the increase in sentence length and the morphological development that occurs along with it. In relation to tense, the following are listed in “Brown’s 14 Morphemes”.

TENSE	MORPHEME	EXAMPLE	AGE OF MASTERY (used correctly 90% of the time).
Present Progressive	-ing	Doggy barking	19-28 mths
Irregular Past		Car broke.	25-46mths
Regular Past	-ed	Mummy jumped.	26-48mths

It should be noted, that common irregular past tense forms are thought to be learnt as whole words in the early stages (above) but may later be lost, when children learn and overgeneralise the rule of adding –ed. Thus, a child who may have said “Puppy **went** bye bye” at 28 months may be saying “Puppy **goed** away” at 36 months.

Usually this sorts itself out again by around 4 years of age.

At school-age, most children will be using a large number of irregular past tense forms correctly, but it is quite normal for some errors to persist. Patterns may be incorrectly generalized from known words... For example, a child who knows that “sing” becomes “sang” might generalise this rule and say “I brang my lunch today.”

More difficult verb forms continue to be mastered into later primary school. Acquisition is largely promoted by reading more difficult text and trying to communicate more complex notions.

An example of complex use of tense is: “*I’m betting that the cat has already destroyed the couch given that we left it inside this morning.*”

Delayed or Disordered Development

Children with language impairment frequently have difficulty acquiring verb tense. They go through a prolonged period where they continue to use the unmodified form of the verb.

Although the length of their sentence may be greater than their younger counterparts, their use of morphology is similar or less developed.

In one study, Van der Lely and Ullman investigated how children with “grammar-specific language impairment” (G-SLI) and typically developing children used regular and irregular past tense. The typically developing children showed a significant advantage for regular over irregular verbs whereas the language-impaired children did not. The researchers claimed that children with G-SLI attempt to store all the past tense verb forms – both regular and irregular - as “whole units” in their brains’ filing cabinets, whereas the other children, do this for the irregular verb forms, but for the regular forms, generate a rule that can be used across many many verbs (“Just add –ed to the stem of the verb and I’ve got the past tense.”)

Further to this study, an interesting finding was made by Marshall and van der Lely, 2006) when they looked at children with G-SLI and their ability to learn regular past tense forms. They found that when the verb forms ended in an illegal cluster* the verbs were less easily learnt than when they ended in a legal cluster. For typically developing children, this distinction in learning was not evident.

*An illegal cluster are two sounds that do not occur with a base word in English.

For example, we never have the letters bt to begin a word, whereas we have bl. Thus, bt is an illegal cluster and bl is legal. Likewise, we have ft to end a word (a legal cluster) but not bd (an illegal cluster).

When it comes to adding –ed, however, we DO get words that sound like they end in illegal clusters.... ROBBED (ends in the sounds /bd/) whereas LAUGHED (ends in the sounds /ft/). In these examples, “robbed” contains an illegal cluster and was more difficult to learn and “laughed” was legal and was the easier. A word like “painted” is also in the easy category because it does not include an illegal cluster. In fact, it does not include a cluster at all.

It appears obvious then, that to help children use tense in their speech, we need to help them learn and then use rules such as adding –ed to verbs. It could also be suggested, given the above research, that more success will be gained if we first work on irregular past tense forms that contain legal clusters, or better still NO clusters.

Encouraging the Development of Tense:

- Developing the use and comprehension of tense can be done in regular ways such as reading lots with children and choosing books that contain good, clear examples of tense. When sharing a story, future events can be guessed and even conditional tense explored. “What would you do if...?”
- Factual/non-fiction books are not always good for highlighting past or future tense. “Flies only have 2 wings. Most insects have 4. Their wings beat up to 200 times per second.” (Many students with language impairment are drawn to such books)!
- More explicit intervention can take a number of forms, depending on the stage, age and needs of the child. Explicit work might target TIME PHRASES/WORDS.

- Our intervention should always, where possible, be accompanied by visual cues (such as gestures and timelines).
- A handy tipsheet about “Understanding Time” contains ideas for exploring past and future and can be found on the AUTISM page of www.pelicantalk.com Although written for an autism magazine, this article can assist with many other children with language impairment.
- Explicit intervention might also target verb forms...
If this is the case, we must also consider how many verbs the child has in their vocabulary (even before we start changing the tense).
- In a study by Watkins, Rice and Moltz (1993), five year olds with language impairment had a smaller bank of verbs than three year olds non-affected children. One author suggested that for this reason, grammatical intervention should focus around the use of new verbs and through modelling and recasting, various forms of the verb can be explored. For example, in a play task you could explore the verbs “chop”: *“He’s chopping the carrots – oh, look how many carrots he chopped! Do you want to chop some? Wow! What did you do?”*
In my mind, however, we need to decide whether a child’s primary deficit is in the area of limited verb use per se, or in the lack of tense, and target accordingly.

Focused Stimulation

An intervention technique, known to be successful in grammatical therapy is “focused stimulation” (Fey et al, 2006). A naturalistic play situation is set where the grammatical target can be demonstrated clearly and explicitly. For regular past tense, I have used a puppet, Bart, who has some photos to show me. It goes something like this...
The puppet shows the photos to the “teacher” and she looks at them. The teacher asks when the photos were taken and Bart says “Last night”. This sets the time.
The teacher then looks at the photos with the child and Bart models the verbs, repeating them often.

“Ok, so last night, I ... cooked pasta... I cooked some great pasta...”

“I filled up everybody’s plates... filled them right up.”

“ I gobbled it all up... gobbled gobbled gobbled. In fact they all gobbled their pasta up. I must have cooked some yummy pasta ”

“Then, I collected all the plates. I collected them all. I piled them up... piled them high.”

“Then I washed the dishes. Nobody even helped! ”

Next, the teacher says... “Wow... I’m going to see if I can remember everything you did...”

She gives the child all the photos to hold and says “Don’t show me...”

She then starts repeating the events slowly. At times, she might pretend to struggle, by starting and giving the opportunity for the child to finish...

“Then Bart...”

Next, it’s the child’s turn. They are asked if they can remember what happened.

The teacher might need to use a prompt. Time phrases can help set the time; “Last night, Bart...” or might flash the photo at the child.

If the child attempts to complete the sentence, but neglects to use TENSE, simply “recast” .

Child: “He cook the pasta!”

Teacher: “Yes! (use the past gesture). He cooked the pasta, he cooked it... I like that photo. It shows me how last night, he...”

Child: “Cook it.”

If the child gives a second incorrect attempt, the teacher might try to elicit some imitation. (Some children will clam up at this, so don't be too forceful. Just HEARING lots of clear repeated past tense is great therapy in itself.)

Teacher: "Let's say "He cooked pasta."

Child: "Cooked pasta."

Teacher: "Fabulous!"

Another technique used in "focused stimulation" can be asking choice questions to elicit copying, but be careful with this when eliciting past tense as you won't always be modelling the target past tense. For example, "Then did he fill up everyone's plate or did he let them dish it up?" (Oh dear, you didn't model our target word "filled").

Keep intervention meaningful, fun and relate it to the needs of a child. Let people in other settings know what the goals are, and suggest specific examples of what they can do to help. It might be asking Mum that you would like her to sit with their child and list three things they did that day as a sort of a "memory game". Encourage Mum to use interesting verbs rather than WENT, GOT and HAD.... "I walked to the park with your sister." "I queued up at the bank and they gave me some money." "I bought some food at the supermarket." The child has to see if they can repeat all three. Although this is simple, kids love it.

Finally, for more practical ideas on Teaching Tense, see Pelican Talk's tipsheet – out at the end of October via www.pelicantalk.com Pelican Talk tipsheets contain practical activities and suggestions, making them a good handout for parents.

This article was written by Lucia Smith. October 2013.

Our Favourite Resource Targeting Tense in Simple Sentences:

Alien Talk www.pelicantalk.com (download the overview on the website).

References and Further Reading

A chart of irregular past tense verb forms: <http://www.chompchomp.com/rules/irregularrules01.htm>

A fascinating Podcast or transcript on language and thought by Alice Gaby, linguist, is below.

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/allinthemind/how-language-shapes-thought/4329212#transcript>

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